

BRET HARTE

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LOVE STORY

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I

It was raining and blowing at Eldridge's Crossing. From the stately pine-trees on the hill-tops, which were dignifiedly protesting through their rigid spines upward, to the hysterical willows in the hollow, that had whipped themselves into a maudlin fury, there was a general tumult. When the wind lulled, the rain kept up the distraction, firing long volleys across the road, letting loose miniature cataracts from the hill-sides to brawl in the ditches, and beating down the heavy heads of wild oats on the levels; when the rain ceased for a moment the wind charged over the already defeated field, ruffled the gullies, scattered the spray from the roadside pines, and added insult to injury. But both wind and rain concentrated their energies in a malevolent attempt to utterly disperse and scatter the "Half-way House," which seemed to have wholly lost its way, and strayed into the open, where, dazed and bewildered, unprepared and unprotected, it was exposed to the taunting fury of the blast. A loose, shambling, disjointed, hastily built structure—representing the worst features of Pioneer renaissance—it rattled its loose window-sashes like chattering teeth, banged its ill-hung shutters, and admitted so much of the invading storm, that it might have blown up or blown down with equal facility.

Jefferson Briggs, proprietor and landlord of the "Half-way House," had just gone through the formality of closing his house for the night, hanging dangerously out of the window in the vain attempt to subdue a rebellious shutter that had evidently entered into conspiracy with the invaders, and, shutting a door as against a sheriff's posse, was going to bed—i. e., to read himself asleep, as was his custom. As he entered his little bedroom in the attic with a highly exciting novel in his pocket and a kerosene lamp in his hand, the wind, lying in wait for him, instantly extinguished his lamp and slammed the door behind him. Jefferson Briggs relighted the lamp, as if confidentially, in a corner, and, shielding it in the bosom of his red flannel shirt, which gave him the appearance of an illuminated shrine, hung a heavy bear-skin across the window, and then carefully deposited his lamp upon a chair at his bedside. This done, he kicked off his boots, flung them into a corner, and, rolling himself in a blanket, lay down upon the bed. A habit of early rising, bringing with it, presumably, the proverbial accompaniment of health, wisdom, and pecuniary emoluments, had also brought with it certain ideas of the effeminacy of separate toilettes and the virtue of readiness.

In a few moments he was deep in a chapter.

A vague pecking at his door—as of an unseasonable woodpecker, finally asserted itself to his consciousness. "Come in," he said, with his eye still on the page.

The door opened to a gaunt figure, partly composed of bed-quilt and partly of plaid shawl. A predominance of the latter and a long wisp of iron-gray hair determined her sex. She leaned against the post with an air of fatigue, half moral and half physical.

"How ye kin lie thar, abed, Jeff, and read and smoke on sich a night! The sperrit o' the Lord abroad over the yearth—and up stage not gone by yet. Well, well! it's well thar ez SOME EZ CAN'T SLEEP."

"The up coach, like as not, is stopped by high water on the North Fork, ten miles away, aunty," responded Jeff, keeping to the facts. Possibly not recognizing the hand of the beneficent Creator in the rebellious window shutter, he avoided theology.

"Well," responded the figure, with an air of delivering an unheeded and thankless warning, "it is not for ME to say. P'raps it's all His wisdom that some will keep to their own mind. It's well ez some hezn't narves, and kin luxuriate in terbacker in the night watches. But He says, 'I'll come like a thief in the night!'—like a thief in the night, Jeff."

Totally unable to reconcile this illustration with the delayed “Pioneer” coach and Yuba Bill, its driver, Jeff lay silent. In his own way, perhaps, he was uneasy—not to say shocked—at his aunt’s habitual freedom of scriptural quotation, as that good lady herself was with an occasional oath from his lips; a fact, by the way, not generally understood by purveyors of Scripture, licensed and unlicensed.

“I’d take a pull at them bitters, aunty,” said Jeff feebly, with his wandering eye still recurring to his page. “They’ll do ye a power of good in the way o’ calmin’ yer narves.”

“Ef I was like some folks I wouldn’t want bitters—though made outer the simplest yarbs of the yearth, with jest enough sperrit to bring out the vartoots—ez Deacon Stoer’s Balm ‘er Gilead is—what yer meaning? Ef I was like some folks I could lie thar and smoke in the lap o’ idleness—with fourteen beds in the house empty, and nary lodger for one of ‘em. Ef I was that indifferent to havin’ invested my fortin in the good will o’ this house, and not ez much ez a single transient lookin’ in, I could lie down and take comfort in profane literatoor. But it ain’t in me to do it. And it wasn’t your father’s way, Jeff, neither!”

As the elder Briggs’s way had been to seek surcease from such trouble at the gambling table, and eventually, in suicide, Jeff could not deny it. But he did not say that a full realization of his unhappy venture overcame him as he closed the blinds of the hotel that night; and that the half desperate idea of abandoning it then and there to the warring elements that had resented his trespass on Nature seemed to him an act of simple reason and justice. He did not say this, for easy-going natures are not apt to explain the processes by which their content or resignation is reached, and are therefore supposed to have none. Keeping to the facts, he simply suggested the weather was unfavorable to travelers, and again found his place on the page before him. Fixing it with his thumb, he looked up resignedly. The figure wearily detached itself from the door-post, and Jeff’s eyes fell on his book. “You won’t stop, aunty?” he asked mechanically, as if reading aloud from the page; but she was gone.

A little ashamed, although much relieved, Jeff fell back again to literature, interrupted only by the charging of the wind and the heavy volleys of rain. Presently he found himself wondering if a certain banging were really a shutter, and then, having settled in his mind that it WAS, he was startled by a shout. Another, and in the road before the house!

Jeff put down the book, and marked the place by turning down the leaf, being one of that large class of readers whose mental faculties are butter-fingered, and easily slip their hold. Then he resumed his boots and was duly caparisoned. He extinguished the kerosene lamp, and braved the outer air, and strong currents of the hall and stairway in the darkness. Lighting two candles in the bar-room, he proceeded to unlock the hall door. At the same instant a furious blast shook the house, the door yielded slightly and impelled a thin, meek-looking stranger violently against Jeff, who still struggled with it.

“An accident has occurred,” began the stranger, “and”—but here the wind charged again, blew open the door, pinned Jeff behind it back against the wall, overturned the dripping stranger, dashed up the staircase, and slammed every door in the house, ending triumphantly with No. 14, and a crash of glass in the window.

“Come, rouse up!” said Jeff, still struggling with the door, “rouse up and lend a hand yer!”

Thus abjured, the stranger crept along the wall towards Jeff and began again, “We have met with an accident.” But here another and mightier gust left him speechless, covered him with spray of a wildly disorganized water-spout that, dangling from the roof, seemed to be playing on the front door, drove him into black obscurity and again sandwiched his host between the door and the wall. Then there was a lull, and in the midst of it Yuba Bill, driver of the “Pioneer” coach, quietly and coolly, impervious in waterproof, walked into the hall, entered the bar-room, took a candle, and, going behind the bar, selected a bottle, critically examined it, and, returning, poured out a quantity of whiskey in a glass and gulped it in a single draught.

All this while Jeff was closing the door, and the meek-looking man was coming into the light again.

Yuba Bill squared his elbows behind him and rested them on the bar, crossed his legs easily and awaited them. In reply to Jeff's inquiring but respectful look, he said shortly—

“Oh, you're thar, are ye?”

“Yes, Bill.”

“Well, this yer new-fangled road o' yours is ten feet deep in the hollow with back water from the North Fork! I've taken that yar coach inter fower feet of it, and then I reckoned I couldn't hev any more. ‘I'll stand on this yer hand,’ sez I; I brought the horses up yer and landed ‘em in your barn to eat their blessed heads off till the water goes down. That's wot's the matter, old man, and jist about wot I kalkilated on from those durned old improvements o' yours.”

Coloring a little at this new count in the general indictment against the uselessness of the “Half-way House,” Jeff asked if there were “any passengers?”

Yuba Bill indicated the meek stranger with a jerk of his thumb. “And his wife and darter in the coach. They're all right and tight, ez if they was in the Fifth Avenue Hotel. But I reckon he allows to fetch ‘em up yer,” added Bill, as if he strongly doubted the wisdom of the transfer.

The meek man, much meeker for the presence of Bill, here suggested that such indeed was his wish, and further prayed that Jeff would accompany him to the coach to assist in bringing them up. “It's rather wet and dark,” said the man apologetically; “my daughter is not strong. Have you such a thing as a waterproof?”

Jeff had not; but would a bear-skin do?

It would.

Jeff ran, tore down his extempore window curtain, and returned with it. Yuba Bill, who had quietly and disapprovingly surveyed the proceeding, here disengaged himself from the bar with evident reluctance.

“You'll want another man,” he said to Jeff, “onless ye can carry double. Ez HE,” indicating the stranger, “ez no sort o' use, he'd better stay here and ‘tend bar,’ while you and me fetch the wimmen off. ‘Specially ez I reckon we've got to do some tall wadin’ by this time to reach ‘em.”

The meek man sat down helplessly in a chair indicated by Bill, who at once strode after Jeff. In another moment they were both fighting their way, step by step, against the storm, in that peculiar, drunken, spasmodic way so amusing to the spectator and so exasperating to the performer. It was no time for conversation, even interjectional profanity was dangerously exhaustive.

The coach was scarcely a thousand yards away, but its bright lights were reflected in a sheet of dark silent water that stretched between it and the two men. Wading and splashing, they soon reached it, and a gully where the surplus water was pouring into the valley below. “Fower feet o' water round her, but can't get any higher. So ye see she's all right for a month o' sich weather.” Inwardly admiring the perspicacity of his companion, Jeff was about to open the coach door when Bill interrupted.

“I'll pack the old woman, if you'll look arter the darter and enny little traps.”

A female face, anxious and elderly, here appeared at the window.

“Thet's my little game,” said Bill, sotto voce.

“Is there any danger? where is my husband?” asked the woman impatiently.

“Ez to the danger, ma'am,—thar ain't any. Yer ez safe HERE ez ye'd be in a Sacramento steamer; ez to your husband, he allowed I was to come yer and fetch yer up to the hotel. That's his look-out!” With this cheering speech, Bill proceeded to make two or three ineffectual scoops into the dark interior, manifestly with the idea of scooping out the lady in question. In another instant he had caught her, lifted her gently but firmly in his arms, and was turning away.

“But my child!—my daughter! she's asleep!”—expostulated the woman; but Bill was already swiftly splashing through the darkness. Jeff, left to himself, hastily examined the coach: on the back seat a slight small figure, enveloped in a shawl, lay motionless. Jeff threw the bear-skin over it gently,

lifted it on one arm, and gathering a few travelling bags and baskets with the other, prepared to follow his quickly disappearing leader. A few feet from the coach the water appeared to deepen, and the bear-skin to draggle. Jeff drew the figure up higher, in vain.

“Sis,” he said softly.

No reply.

“Sis,” shaking her gently.

There was a slight movement within the wrappings.

“Couldn’t ye climb up on my shoulder, honey? that’s a good child!”

There were one or two spasmodic jerks of the bear-skin, and, aided by Jeff, the bundle was presently seated on his shoulder.

“Are you all right now, Sis?”

Something like a laugh came from the bear-skin. Then a childish voice said, “Thank you, I think I am!”

“Ain’t you afraid you’ll fall off?”

“A little.”

Jeff hesitated. It was beginning to blow again.

“You couldn’t reach down and put your arm round my neck, could ye, honey?”

“I am afraid not!”—although there WAS a slight attempt to do so.

“No?”

“No!”

“Well, then, take a good holt, a firm strong holt, o’ my hair! Don’t be afraid!”

A small hand timidly began to rummage in Jeff’s thick curls.

“Take a firm holt; thar, just back o’ my neck! That’s right.”

The little hand closed over half a dozen curls. The little figure shook, and giggled.

“Now don’t you see, honey, if I’m keerless with you, and don’t keep you plump level up thar, you jist give me a pull and fetch me up all standing!”

“I see!”

“Of course you do! That’s because you’re a little lady!”

Jeff strode on. It was pleasant to feel the soft warm fingers in his hair, pleasant to hear the faint childish voice, pleasant to draw the feet of the enwrapped figure against his broad breast. Altogether he was sorry when they reached the dry land and the lee of the “Half-way House,” where a slight movement of the figure expressed a wish to dismount.

“Not yet, missy,” said Jeff; “not yet! You’ll get blown away, sure! And then what’ll they say? No, honey! I’ll take you right in to your papa, just as ye are!”

A few steps more and Jeff strode into the hall, made his way to the sitting-room, walked to the sofa, and deposited his burden. The bear-skin fell back, the shawl fell back, and Jeff—fell back too! For before him lay a small, slight, but beautiful and perfectly formed woman.

He had time to see that the meek man, no longer meek, but apparently a stern uncompromising parent, was standing at the head of the sofa; that the elderly and nervous female was hovering at the foot, that his aunt, with every symptom of religious and moral disapproval of his conduct, sat rigidly in one of the rigid chairs—he had time to see all this before the quick, hot blood, flying to his face, sent the water into his eyes, and he could see nothing!

The cause of all this smiled—a dazzling smile though a faint one—that momentarily lit up the austere gloom of the room and its occupants. “You must thank this gentleman, papa,” said she, languidly turning to her father, “for his kindness and his trouble. He has carried me here as gently and as carefully as if I were a child.” Seeing symptoms of a return of Jeff’s distress in his coloring face, she added softly, as if to herself, “It’s a great thing to be strong—a greater thing to be strong AND gentle.”

The voice thrilled through Jeff. But into this dangerous human voice twanged the accents of special spiritual revelation, and called him to himself again, “Be ye wise as sarpints, but harmless as duvs,” said Jeff’s aunt, generally, “and let ‘em be thankful ez doesn’t aboos the stren’t’h the Lord gives ‘em, but be allers ready to answer for it at the bar o’ their Maker.” Possibly some suggestion in her figure of speech reminded her of Jeff’s forgotten duties, so she added in the same breath and tone, “especially when transient customers is waiting for their licker, and Yuba Bill hammerin’ on the counter with his glass; and yer ye stand, Jeff, never even takin’ up that wet bar-skin—enuff to give that young woman her death.”

Stammering out an incoherent apology, addressed vaguely to the occupants of the room, but looking toward the languid goddess on the sofa, Jeff seized the bear-skin and backed out the door. Then he flew to his room with it, and then returned to the bar-room; but the impatient William of Yuba had characteristically helped himself and gone off to the stable. Then Jeff stole into the hall and halted before the closed door of the sitting-room. A bold idea of going in again, as became a landlord of the “Half-way House,” with an inquiry if they wished anything further, had seized him, but the remembrance that he had always meekly allowed that duty to devolve upon his aunt, and that she would probably resent it with scriptural authority and bring him to shame again, stayed his timid knuckles at the door. In this hesitation he stumbled upon his aunt coming down the stairs with an armful of blankets and pillows, attended by their small Indian servant, staggering under a mattress.

“Is everything all right, aunty?”

“Ye kin be thankful to the Lord, Jeff Briggs, that this didn’t happen last week when I was down on my back with rheumatiz. But ye’re never grateful.”

“The young lady—is SHE comfortable?” said Jeff, accepting his aunt’s previous remark as confirmatory.

“Ez well ez enny critter marked by the finger of the Lord with gallopin’ consumption kin be, I reckon. And she, ez oughter be putting off airthly vanities, askin’ for a lookin’-glass! And you! trapesin’ through the hall with her on yer shoulder, and dancin’ and jouncin’ her up and down ez if it was a ball-room!” A guilty recollection that he had skipped with her through the passage struck him with remorse as his aunt went on: “It’s a mercy that betwixt you and the wet bar-skin she ain’t got her deth!”

“Don’t ye think, aunty,” stammered Jeff, “that—that—my bein’ the landlord, yer know, it would be the square thing—just out o’ respect, ye know—for me to drop in thar and ask ‘em if thar’s anythin’ they wanted?”

His aunt stopped, and resignedly put down the pillows. “Sarah,” she said meekly to the handmaiden, “ye kin leave go that mattress. Yer’s Mr. Jefferson thinks we ain’t good enough to make the beds for them two city women folks, and he allows he’ll do it himself!”

“No, no! aunty!” began the horrified Jeff; but failing to placate his injured relative, took safety in flight.

Once safe in his own room his eye fell on the bear-skin. It certainly WAS wet. Perhaps he had been careless—perhaps he had imperiled her life! His cheeks flushed as he threw it hastily in the corner. Something fell from it to the floor. Jeff picked it up and held it to the light. It was a small, a very small, lady’s slipper. Holding it within the palm of his hand as if it had been some delicate flower which the pressure of a finger might crush, he strode to the door, but stopped. Should he give it to his aunt? Even if she overlooked this evident proof of HIS carelessness, what would she think of the young lady’s? Ought he—seductive thought!—go downstairs again, knock at the door, and give it to its fair owner, with the apology he was longing to make? Then he remembered that he had but a few moments before been dismissed from the room very much as if he were the original proprietor of the skin he had taken. Perhaps they were right; perhaps he WAS only a foolish clumsy animal! Yet SHE had thanked him—and had said in her sweet childlike voice, “It is a great thing to be strong; a greater thing to be strong and gentle.” He was strong; strong men had said so. He did not know if he

was gentle too. Had she meant THAT, when she turned her strangely soft dark eyes upon him? For some moments he held the slipper hesitatingly in his hand, then he opened his trunk, and disposing various articles around it as if it were some fragile, perishable object, laid it carefully therein.

This done, he drew off his boots, and rolling himself in his blanket, lay down upon the bed. He did not open his novel—he did not follow up the exciting love episode of his favorite hero—so ungrateful is humanity to us poor romancers, in the first stages of their real passion. Ah, me! 'tis the jongleurs and troubadours they want then, not us! When Master Slender, sick for sweet Anne Page, would “rather than forty shillings” he had his “book of songs and sonnets” there, what availed it that the Italian Boccaccio had contemporaneously discoursed wisely and sweetly of love in prose? I doubt not that Master Jeff would have mumbled some verse to himself had he known any: knowing none, he lay there and listened to the wind.

Did she hear it; did it keep her awake? He had an uneasy suspicion that the shutter that was banging so outrageously was the shutter of her room. Filled with this miserable thought, he arose softly, stole down the staircase, and listened. The sound was repeated. It was truly the refractory shutter of No. 7—the best bedroom adjoining the sitting-room. The next room, No. 8, was vacant. Jeff entered it softly, as softly opened the window, and leaning far out in the tempest, essayed to secure the nocturnal disturber. But in vain. Cord or rope he had none, nor could he procure either without alarming his aunt—an extremity not to be considered. Jeff was a man of clumsy but forceful expedients. He hung far out of the window, and with one powerful hand lifted the shutter off its hinges and dragged it softly into No. 8. Then as softly he crept upstairs to bed. The wind howled and tore round the house; the crazy water-pipe below Jeff's window creaked, the chimneys whistled, but the shutter banged no more. Jeff began to doze. “It's a great thing to be strong,” the wind seemed to say as it charged upon the defenseless house, and then another voice seemed to reply, “A greater thing to be strong and gentle;” and hearing this he fell asleep.

II

It was not yet daylight when he awoke with an idea that brought him hurriedly to his feet. Quickly dressing himself, he began to count the money in his pocket. Apparently the total was not satisfactory, as he endeavored to augment it by loose coins fished from the pockets of his other garments, and from the corner of his washstand drawer. Then he cautiously crept downstairs, seized his gun, and stole out of the still sleeping house. The wind had gone down, the rain had ceased, a few stars shone steadily in the north, and the shapeless bulk of the coach, its lamps extinguished, loomed high and dry above the lessening water, in the twilight. With a swinging tread Jeff strode up the hill and was soon upon the highway and stage road. A half-hour's brisk walk brought him to the summit, and the first rosy flashes of morning light. This enabled him to knock over half-a-dozen early quail, lured by the proverb, who were seeking their breakfast in the chaparral, and gave him courage to continue on his mission, which his perplexed face and irresolute manner had for the last few moments shown to be an embarrassing one. At last the white fences and imposing outbuildings of the "Summit Hotel" rose before him, and he uttered a deep sigh. There, basking in the first rays of the morning sun, stood his successful rival! Jeff looked at the well-built, comfortable structure, the commanding site, and the air of serene independence that seemed to possess it, and no longer wondered that the great world passed him by to linger and refresh itself there.

He was relieved to find the landlord was not present in person, and so confided his business to the bar-keeper. At first it appeared that that functionary declined interference, and with many head-shakings and audible misgivings was inclined to await the coming of his principal, but a nearer view of Jeff's perplexed face, and an examination of Jeff's gun, and the few coins spread before him, finally induced him to produce certain articles, which he packed in a basket and handed to Jeff, taking the gun and coins in exchange. Thus relieved, Jeff set his face homewards, and ran a race with the morning into the valley, reaching the "Half-way House" as the sun laid waste its bare, bleak outlines, and relentlessly pointed out its defects one by one. It was cruel to Jeff at that moment, but he hugged his basket close and slipped to the back door and the kitchen, where his aunt was already at work.

"I didn't know ye were up yet, aunty," said Jeff submissively. "It isn't more than six o'clock."

"Thar's four more to feed at breakfast," said his aunt severely, "and yer's the top blown off the kitchen chimbley, and the fire only just got to go."

Jeff saw that he was in time. The ordinary breakfast of the "Half-way House," not yet prepared, consisted of codfish, ham, yellow-ochre biscuit, made after a peculiar receipt of his aunt's, and potatoes.

"I got a few fancy fixin's up at the Summit this morning, aunty," he began apologetically, "seein' we had sick folks, you know—you and the young lady—and thinkin' it might save you trouble. I've got 'em here," and he shyly produced the basket.

"If ye kin afford it, Jeff," responded his aunt resignedly, "I'm thankful."

The reply was so unexpectedly mild for Aunt Sally, that Jeff put his arms around her and kissed her hard cheek. "And I've got some quail, aunty, knowin' you liked em."

"I reckoned you was up to some such foolishness," said Aunt Sally, wiping her cheek with her apron, "when I missed yer gun from the hall." But the allusion was a dangerous one, and Jeff slipped away.

He breakfasted early with Yuba Bill that morning; the latter gentleman's taciturnity being intensified at such moments through a long habit of confining himself strictly to eating in the limited time allowed his daily repasts, and it was not until they had taken the horses from the stable and were harnessing them to the coach that Jeff extracted from his companion some facts about his guests. They were Mr. and Mrs. Mayfield, Eastern tourists, who had been to the Sandwich Islands for the benefit of their daughter's health, and before returning to New York, intended, under the advice of

their physician, to further try the effects of mountain air at the "Summit Hotel," on the invalid. They were apparently rich people, the coach had been engaged for them solely—even the mail and express had been sent on by a separate conveyance, so that they might be more independent. It is hardly necessary to say that this fact was by no means palatable to Bill—debaring him not only the social contact and attentions of the "Express Agent," but the selection of a box-seated passenger who always "acted like a man."

"Ye kin kalkilate what kind of a pardner that 'ar yaller-livered Mayfield would make up on that box, partik'ly ez I heard before we started that he'd requested the kimpany's agent in Sacramento to select a driver ez didn't cuss, smoke, or drink. He did, sir, by gum!"

"I reckon you were very careful, then, Bill," said Jeff.

"In course," returned Bill, with a perfectly diabolical wink. "In course! You know that 'Blue Grass,'" pointing out a spirited leader; "she's a fair horse ez horses go, but she's apt to feel her oats on a down grade, and takes a pow'ful deal o' soothin' and explanation afore she buckles down to her reg'lar work. Well, sir, I exhorted and labored in a Christian-like way with that mare to that extent that I'm cussed if that chap didn't want to get down afore we got to the level!"

"And the ladies?" asked Jeff, whose laugh—possibly from his morning's experience—was not as ready as formerly.

"The ladies! Ef you mean that 'ar livin' skellington I packed up to yer house," said Bill promptly, "it's a pair of them in size and color, and ready for any first-class undertaker's team in the kintry. Why, you remember that curve on Break Neck hill, where the leaders allus look as if they was alongside o' the coach and faced the other way? Well, that woman sticks her skull out the window, and sez she, confidential-like to old yaller-belly, sez she, 'William Henry,' sez she, 'tell that man his horses are running away!'"

"You didn't get to see the—the—daughter, Bill, did you?" asked Jeff, whose laugh had become quite uneasy.

"No, I didn't," said Bill, with sudden and inexplicable vehemence, "and the less you see of her, Jefferson Briggs, the better for you."

Too confounded and confused by Bill's manner to question further, Jeff remained silent until they drew up at the door of the "Half-way House." But here another surprise awaited him. Mr. Mayfield, erect and dignified, stood upon the front porch as the coach drove up.

"Driver!" began Mr. Mayfield.

There was no reply.

"Driver," said Mr. Mayfield, slightly weakening under Bill's eye, "I shall want you no longer. I have"—

"Is he speaking to me?" said Bill audibly to Jeff, "'cause they call me 'Yuba Bill' yer abouts."

"He is," said Jeff hastily.

"Mebbee he's drunk," said Bill audibly; "a drop or two afore breakfast sometimes upsets his kind."

"I was saying, Bill," said Mr. Mayfield, becoming utterly limp and weak again under Bill's cold gray eyes, "that I've changed my mind, and shall stop here awhile. My daughter seems already benefited by the change. You can take my traps from the boot and leave them here."

Bill laid down his lines resignedly, coolly surveyed Mr. Mayfield, the house, and the half-pleased, half-frightened Jeff, and then proceeded to remove the luggage from the boot, all the while whistling loud and offensive incredulity. Then he climbed back to his box. Mr. Mayfield, completely demoralized under this treatment, as a last resort essayed patronage.

"You can say to the Sacramento agents, Bill, that I am entirely satisfied, and"—

"Ye needn't fear but I'll give ye a good character," interrupted Bill coolly, gathering up his lines. The whip snapped, the six horses dashed forward as one, the coach plunged down the road and was gone.

With its disappearance, Mr. Mayfield stiffened slightly again. "I have just told your aunt, Mr. Briggs," he said, turning upon Jeff, "that my daughter has expressed a desire to remain here a few days; she has slept well, seems to be invigorated by the air, and although we expected to go on to the 'Summit,' Mrs. Mayfield and myself are willing to accede to her wishes. Your house seems to be new and clean. Your table—judging from the breakfast this morning—is quite satisfactory."

Jeff, in the first flush of delight at this news, forgot what that breakfast had cost him—forgot all his morning's experience, and, I fear, when he did remember it, was too full of a vague, hopeful courage to appreciate it. Conscious of showing too much pleasure, he affected the necessity of an immediate interview with his aunt, in the kitchen. But his short cut round the house was arrested by a voice and figure. It was Miss Mayfield, wrapped in a shawl and seated in a chair, basking in the sunlight at one of the bleakest and barest angles of the house. Jeff stopped in a delicious tremor.

As we are dealing with facts, however, it would be well to look at the cause of this tremor with our own eyes and not Jeff's. To be plain, my dear madam, as she basked in that remorseless, matter-of-fact California sunshine, she looked her full age—twenty-five, if a day! There were wrinkles in the corners of her dark eyes, contracted and frowning in that strong, merciless light; there was a nervous pallor in her complexion; but being one of those "fast colored" brunettes, whose dyes are a part of their temperament, no sickness nor wear could bleach it out. The red of her small mouth was darker than yours, I wot, and there were certain faint lines from the corners of her delicate nostrils indicating alternate repression and excitement under certain experiences, which are not found in the classic ideals. Now Jeff knew nothing of the classic ideal—did not know that a thousand years ago certain sensual idiots had, with brush and chisel, inflicted upon the world the personification of the strongest and most delicate, most controlling and most subtle passion that humanity is capable of, in the likeness of a thick-waisted, idealess, expressionless, perfectly contented female animal; and that thousands of idiots had since then insisted upon perpetuating this model for the benefit of a world that had gone on sighing for, pining for, fighting for, and occasionally blowing its brains out over types far removed from that idiotic standard.

Consequently Jeff saw only a face full of possibilities and probabilities, framed in a small delicate oval, saw a slight woman's form—more than usually small—and heard a low voice, to him full of gentle pride, passion, pathos, and human weakness, and was helpless.

"I only said 'Good-morning,'" said Miss Mayfield, with that slight, arch satisfaction in the observation of masculine bashfulness, which the best of her sex cannot forego.

"Thank you, miss; good-morning. I've been wanting to say to you that I hope you wasn't mad, you know," stammered Jeff, desperately intent upon getting off his apology.

"It is so lovely this morning—such a change!" continued Miss Mayfield.

"Yes, miss! You know I reckoned—at least what your father said, made me kalkilate that you"—

Miss Mayfield, still smiling, knitted her brows and went on: "I slept so well last night," she said gratefully, "and feel so much better this morning, that I ventured out. I seem to be drinking in health in this clear sunlight."

"Certainly miss. As I was sayin', your father says his daughter is in the coach; and Bill says, says he to me, 'I'll pack—I'll carry the old—I'll bring up Mrs. Mayfield, if you'll bring up the daughter;' and when we come to the coach I saw you asleep—like in the corner, and bein' small, why miss, you know how nat'ral it is, I"—

"Oh, Mr. Jeff! Mr. Briggs!" said Miss Mayfield plaintively, "don't, please—don't spoil the best compliment I've had in many a year. You thought I was a child, I know, and—well, you find," she said audaciously, suddenly bringing her black eyes to bear on him like a rifle, "you find—well?"

What Jeff thought was inaudible but not invisible. Miss Mayfield saw enough of it in his eye to protest with a faint color in her cheek. Thus does Nature betray itself to Nature the world over.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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